



8-Net - Headlines

EPA's plan to clean up insulation is too limited, some say

EPA's plan to clean up insulation is too limited, some say
BY ANDREW SCHNEIDER
Of the Post-Dispatch
© 2002 St. Louis Post-Dispatch

SDMS Document ID



2032372

05/09/2002 09:25 PM

Tens of millions of pounds of asbestos-contaminated vermiculite passed over Kootenai River from the Zonolite mine in the background into railcars which shipped the dangerous material more than 300 plants across the country. Paul Peronard, who heads the EPA's cleanup operation, says he worries about home owners who may not know they have the cancer-causing material in their attics.

(ANDREW SCHNEIDER/P-D)

The Environmental Protection Agency says it will immediately remove asbestos-contaminated insulation from the attics and walls of hundreds of homes in the tiny northwestern Montana town of Libby.

For many in the agency and elsewhere in the government, the announcement Thursday doesn't go far enough because it ignores the possible dangers outside Libby.

They contend the agency should issue warnings to millions of other home and business owners in Missouri, Illinois and 40 other states that may have the same potentially lethal fibers in their dwellings.

In Seattle, where the contaminated insulation was first found by the EPA two years ago, agency regional spokesman Bill Dunbar said: "Some homeowners are really in the dark. They don't know whether they have this material in their homes or not.

"The logical next step for the agency may be to better communicate with people across the country who may not know that they have this potentially hazardous material in their homes."

The source of the nationwide contamination is insulation, called Zonolite. EPA and W.R. Grace & Co. documents estimate the material is in as many as 35 million homes nationwide, including 380,000 in Missouri and 800,000 in Illinois.

U.S. Sen. Patty Murray said: "The EPA must inform the public that if they have Zonolite insulation in their homes, it may contain asbestos. The EPA must also determine the safest remedy to deal with this national concern.

"Americans need to know that asbestos is still a problem, it is still put into consumer products on purpose, and it is still showing up in products by accident."

The Washington Democrat and her staff have been investigating the government's handling of asbestos and have identified what they see as many deficiencies.

Zonolite came from ore in a now-closed, 80-year-old vermiculite mine. Operations at the mine, last owned by Grace, had for decades inundated Libby's roads, yards, homes, school yards and playgrounds with high levels of asbestos. The EPA says it will now

clean all of these sites.

Hundreds of miners and their relatives have died of asbestos-related diseases, and government medical testing has found thousands more in and near the town with early signs of disease.

Under the new cleanup order, the EPA estimates that 600 to 800 Libby homes and businesses will be decontaminated and repaired at a cost estimated at \$12,000 each.

In February, when the Post-Dispatch first reported the nationwide contamination, U.S. Sen. Jean Carnahan said: "The failure of the EPA to disclose the health hazards that may be in people's houses is extremely troubling.

"This is about public health, but it is also about public confidence in the institutions of government to look out for the best interests of its citizens. The EPA's lack of candor on this issue is unacceptable," the Missouri Democrat said.

Poison spread nationwide

The number of deaths of Libby residents proves that the town is at risk, but sources within the EPA and the U.S. Public Health Service say the danger is far more widespread.

Millions of tons of asbestos-contaminated vermiculite were shipped from Libby to 300 processing and distribution plants throughout North America, including four in St. Louis. A portion of the vermiculite was used for fireproofing, wall board, and garden and nursery products. The vast majority was sold in large paper bags at hardware stores and building supply centers for use as attic and wall insulation.

Grace shipping records indicate that enough Zonolite was shipped across the country to insulate as many as 35 million homes and business.

The announcement Thursday made no mention of this risk, even though various government agencies have proved there is a hazard.

Research done at a handful of the former sites across the country uncovered scores of asbestos-caused deaths and hundreds of related illnesses among former workers, their families and people living near the plants.

The EPA's own personnel worked with other federal health experts and showed that when the vermiculite is undisturbed, the risk from asbestos is minimal. But displacing the material - moving it at all - can release dangerous levels of cancer-causing fibers.

The EPA hired Versar, a consulting firm, to examine the risk from Zonolite and other vermiculite being mined in Virginia and South Carolina.

The company tested four old homes in Vermont.

A preliminary report from Versar shows that low levels of asbestos were found in the insulation in two of the homes tested. But when the scientists collected air above the same insulation that was gently disturbed, they counted 30 times the level of asbestos fibers the Occupational Safety and Health Administration considers safe for worker exposure.

Physicians from the U.S. Public Health Service asked the government two years ago to warn homeowners and workers who do renovations or install phone and television cable devices in the attic that they may be at risk.

Paul Peronard, who heads the EPA cleanup of Libby, said in an interview last month that while he understands the difficult position his agency is in, "if I had Zonolite

in my house I would want to know it, and if I knew it, I would do everything I could to get it out of there."

The government's primary environmental health researchers - the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry - has done medical examinations of thousands of residents in and near Libby. It agrees that the hazard from Zonolite is minimal if it is not disturbed.

"As a matter of course, our agency will favor actions that are protective of public health - and a notification would certainly be one of the courses of action that would be 'protective,'" said Kathy Skipper, the agency's senior spokeswoman.

EPA's internal battle

EPA has agonized over the cleanup order since September, when EPA Administrator Christie Todd Whitman visited Libby and said the EPA would do a better job protecting the public because of the knowledge it had gained about the toxicity of asbestos-contaminated vermiculite.

"We want everyone who comes in contact with vermiculite - from homeowners to handymen - to have the information needed to protect themselves and their families," Whitman told residents.

Scores of EPA action memos, communication strategies and e-mails obtained by the Post-Dispatch document a picture of an agency in turmoil over what to do about the need to clean up Libby and the far thornier issue of the millions of other homes that contain the same dangerous material.

The biggest battles began soon after Peronard and his emergency response team arrived in Libby in November 1999. Almost immediately they went head-to-head with some scientists and managers at EPA headquarters who said there wasn't any real hazard at Libby.

Libby provided a real-life laboratory to study asbestos. The thousands of X-rays of actual patients and hundreds of medical charts of the dead presented a unique opportunity to study how this form of asbestos, called tremolite, killed and sickened.

EPA investigators, toxicologists and physicians from the Department of Health and Human Services proved the dangers of these asbestos fibers. But within EPA headquarters, some, especially the staff of the Office of Pollution, Pesticides and Toxic Substances, balked at the surprising findings that the Denver-based team was reporting.

Agency documents show that some of its key people clung to highly restrictive 20-year-old regulations hammered into law, mostly by asbestos industry scientists and lobbyists.

"It's hard to try to stand behind 20-year-old regulations when we have bodies stacked up here proving they're wrong," said Peronard. "The old beliefs that only long asbestos fibers can cause harm and that only a career of occupational exposure to asbestos would cause illness or death and that tremolite (the asbestos fiber in Zonolite) was not really harmful - none of those are true and we now have the science to prove it."

Grace keeps trying

Grace worked hard to keep the EPA from announcing the cleanup.

In February, a contingent of Grace executives, lawyers and scientific consultants met with EPA officials to present the company's evidence that Zonolite was harmless.

Last month, Grace faxed the EPA an eight-page letter saying that there was no need to notify the public that the contaminated vermiculite might be in millions of homes.

"When it comes to Zonolite being deadly, there's no maybe involved here," said Dr. Aubrey Miller, a U.S. Public Health Service physician assigned to EPA's Libby team, in an interview this year.

"The hundreds of deaths and the very large numbers of people with early signs of asbestos-related disease from exposure to Zonolite should be more than adequate for the most skeptical person," Miller said.

The announcement to clean up Libby was expected to be made 11 times between December and late Thursday when the EPA finally made the announcement.

Some senior people in EPA headquarters describe the last month of decision-making as chaos. Even though there is nothing in the regulations that permits, let alone requires, the EPA to pick up the bill for removing dangerous consumer products, many in the agency are terrified that the public and some members of Congress could expect them to clean up the millions of contaminated homes, which could cost \$10 billion or more. The agency's angst is increased because of the debates over the future funding of Superfund.

Andrew Schneider:
E-mail: aschneider@post-dispatch.com
Phone: 314-340-8101

For additional information, please contact Rich Lathrop.

[8-Net Home](#) [r8 Home](#) [EPA@Work](#) [EPA Home](#) [Search 8-Net](#) [Comments & Help](#)

► Document History

url: <http://R8Net.epa.gov/8-Net.nsf/All+Web+Documents/7F19732494CAA5BD87256BB500505C5D?OpenDocument>